Columbia Theater (Paramount Theatre) 215 Riverside Mall Baton Rouge East Baton Rouge Parish Louisiana

HABS, LA, 17-BAIRC,

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. LA-1133

COLUMBIA THEATER (Paramount Theatre)

Location:

215 Riverside Mall, between Convention and Florida Streets, Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana USGS Baton Rouge West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 15.673940.3369710.

Present Owners:

Columbia Theatre, Inc: Robert A. Hart, III, President; Margaret C. Hart, Vice-President; Marion H. LeBlanc, Vice-President; and Alice H.P. Singer, Secretary-Treasurer.

Present Use:

Movie theater.

Significance:

Originally called the Columbia, this theater, built in 1920, was hailed at its opening as the "most complete temple for silent drama to be found in the Southern States." Walter E. Stephens, of the Baton Rouge architectural firm Prather & Stephens, was both architect and contractor for the new theater. Said to be "the most thoroughly equipped and scientifically built motion picture play house in the South," this fireproof structure boasted the country's first "floorlights" and the country's second automatic dimmer-bank controls for lighting. In 1930, the Columbia's name was changed to Paramount. Still owned by the same family, the Paramount maintains much of its original decoration and mechanical equipment.

# PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

#### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Construction probably began shortly after demolition of the old Columbia Theatre, during Christmas, 1919. The new Columbia opened on September 4, 1920.

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2. Architect and contractor: Walter E. Stephens, of Prather and Stephens, was a graduate of the Masschusetts Institute of Technology and did graduate work at Cambridge University, England, the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, and the Academia de'l Arte, Venice.

Local sources provided little information on his life or career. Odysseus Davis, an employee of the theater from 1920 to 1976, said that Stephens was probably in his early thirties at the time of the theater project. Davis also noted that Stephens did not remain in Baton Rouge long after the completion of the theater. After 1925, he was not listed in the Baton Rouge Directory.

3. Original and subsequent owners:

Conveyance Records of East Baton Rouge Parish, Vol. 64, p. 423, April 12, 1917. Wallace R. Pecue and Lenora V. Evelyn to Columbia Theatre, \$25,000. Lot No. 8 of Square No. 2 or 94 measuring 64 feet front on the west side of 3rd Street by a depth of 128 feet between parallel lines.

Conveyance Records of East Baton Rouge Parish, Vol. 95, p. 191, 1921. Nannie B. Wilson to Columbia Theatre, Inc., \$75,000. Lot 6, Square 2, a lot measuring 64 feet on the north side of Convention by depth of 160 feet.

The corporation, Columbia Theatre, Inc., was chartered June 17, 1915, (Charter Book 1, 126-129) and its purpose was "to operate a motion picture show, or shows; to buy, sell, lease, rent and manufacture motion picture films; to buy, sell, produce and stage motion pictures, plays and real estate." The officers of the corporation were: President, Ernst Boehringer; Vice-President, Malcolm Dougherty; and Secretary-Treasurer, A. McBurney Jackson.

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The corporation was capitalized at \$12,000.

In 1913, the coporation leased "Lot 8, of Square 2 together with all improvements thereon." This refers to the lease agreement for the rental of an existing theater from W.W. Pecue, Tutor to E. Boehringer, for five years, "building and improvements thereon." Monthly rental was set at \$125. (Conveyance Record 51, p. 296, June 15, 1913).

Ownership of the Columbia Theatre, Inc., was changed on January 25, 1917, (Charter Book 1, pp. 261-264) when L.F. Hart became President; Arthur Higginbotham, Vice-President; and Eleanor Hart Stafford, Secretary-Treasurer. Capitalization was increased from \$12,000 to \$25,000 and, subsequently, to \$75,000 on August 6, 1917 (Charter Book 1, p. 291).

Through the years, the theater has been leased to various organizations including the Saenger Theatre, Capital Theatres (an operating company of Columbia Theatre, Inc.,), and Paramount Richards. Ownership of Columbia Theatre has remained with the Hart family. On November 3, 1930, the name of the theater was changed to the Paramount.

- 4. Builder or contractor: The following information was obtained from advertisements in the <u>State Times Advocate</u>, September 2, 1920, pp. 11-12.
  - a. Electrical contractor: W.C. Joubert, 317 Main Street. "Electricity is the outstanding feature of the Columbia Theatre, and has equipment that no other theater so far built has."

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- b. Suppliers: Delta Lumber Company, corner Florida and St. Anthony Sts. Union Builders Supply Co., 1425 Florida.
- 5. Original plan and construction:

A special section of the State Advocate Times dated September 2, 1920, pp. 7-8, 12-13, on the Columbia Theatre provides a good description of the theater. Excerpts are given below:

"COLUMBIA THEATRE, BATON ROUGE'S BEAUTIFUL PLAYHOUSE TO BE OPENED TO PUBLIC SATURDAY"

Detailed Description of Handsome Structure Now Nearing Completion. Most Complete Temple for Silent Drama to Be Found in the Southern States. Distinct Credit to Capital City.

The new Columbia was constructed along original lines by the gifted architect, W.E. Stephens, of the firm of Prather and Stephens, who has supervised every step of the construction work, as well as preparing the plans and specifications for that which has proven to be the most thoroughly equipped and scientifically built motion picture play house in the South.

In preparing the plans for the new Columbia, Manager Higginbotham always held first in mind the essential feature of Safety.... The plans and specifications for the structure were submitted for critical comment to one of the most eminent structural engineers in the United States, Ole K. Olsen, of New Orleans, who, after careful study and analysis, pronounced the safety of the structure far in excess of the standard engineering practices adopted by the Engineers of this country.

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The Columbia Theatre is a thoroughly fireproof building... In addition, it is equipped with twelve fire or panic exits. It is also an important fact that all the main exits are in axial alignment with the aisles....

### A NOVELTY

The Columbia is the first theatre in the country to have floor lights for use in the aisles. These lights were especially made for the Columbia theatre and are an innovative and a strictly original idea of Mr. Stephens.

#### HEATING AND VENTILATION

The Columbia is equipped with three six feet typhoon twin-fans, which can be operated as blowers or exhaust, which enables the management to change every cubic inch of air in the entire house every 35 minutes, equal to changing 238,000 cubic feet of air at the rate of 6,800 cubic feet per minute.

In addition to the fans, additional exhaust registers are placed in the rear of the balcony. The vent shafts are equipped with aspirating coils for use during the winter.

The building is equipped with overhead "Honeywell" hot-water system affording automatic temperature control.

### LIGHTING SYSTEM

The lighting equipment is one of the most flexible known enabling the brilliant illumination of the house at a flash... There is a special arrangement of automatic dimmer-bank controls, the second of its kind in the United States.

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### THE BUILDING

The design of the building is appropriate to its purpose, the motif being a Doric Temple. The group of figures in the tympanum being the three Graces at play, with the interpretation of the drama on one side and comedy on the other representing the sorrow and joy of life. The tympanum is floodlighted by a special arrangement.

The entire front of the building is made The lobby dome represents of cast-stone. an inverted shell concentrating indirect lighting, thereby flooding the street in front with light. The dome and columns are finished in caen stone. The ticket offfice is made of scaggiola (note printer's error - should be scagliola) in conformity with the design, being the reproduction of an old Doric entrance, as engraved on a drinking cup found in the ruins of Pompeii.... The wainscoting and floor of the lobby are covered with mottled tapestry tile of ancient design.

### INTERIOR FINISH

Along the wall boxes we find in halfrelief representation of the Naeriades
completing the theme of the proscenium
painting, which is an interpretation of
the awakening of Spring in Calydon...The
decorating is in a variety of creams,
which are most restful and pleasing to the
eye....

The sounding board over the proscenium arch is equipped with ornamental lattice construction opening to the expression chambers of the great Robert Morton organ.

#### THE STAGE

While the house is principally a motion picture house, it has full stage equipment

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with foot and border lights of the latest design, permitting of the staging of vaudeville. The stage floor is fireproof, as is the balance of the house and the dressing rooms behind the stage.

#### ORCHESTRA FLOOR

The entire orchestra floor is without a post, doing away with the old time methods of obstructing vision... The seating capacity of this floor is over 600.

## MEZZANINE FLOOR

The mezzanine floor is extended on both sides of the wall with spacious wall boxes, providing approximately 200 box seats. The mezzanine floor can be approached by four distinct sets of fireproof stairways. The boxes are furnished with large individual upholstered wicker chairs.

### THE BALCONY

.... The maximum seating capacity of the balcony is 200, bringing the total seating capacity of the house to the 1,100 mark.

### DRINKING FOUNTAINS

One of the most sanitary and novel conveniences in the building are the drinking fountains, which are located on each side of the foyer. These fountains have a water spout extending to the end of a lion's mouth. To cause a flow of water, it is necessary to press a pedal valve. This does away with the old-fashioned faucets manipulated by hand, and are absolutely sanitary for that reason.

### TIME OF CONSTRUCTION

Appreciating the anxiety of the picture lovers of Baton Rouge to once again wend

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their way to their old favorite place of amusement, the Columbia, Mr. Higginbotham has never, at any time, permitted the item of cost to figure in the completion of the building in record time. Notwith standing the great scarcity of building material and labor, or car shortage and a multitude of other drawbacks, in the brief space of say, seven months' time, the doors of the Columbia are now ready to be thrown open to the amusement loving public of Baton Rouge.

### BUILDING MATERIAL

It is a noteworthy fact that every inch of building material used in the new Columbia theatre, whenever possible, was purchased from Baton Rouge dealers, thus showing the appreciation of the management for the splendid local support...Even the ornamental and plaster work were made here in Baton Rouge in the shops of Prather and Stephens....

#### 5. Alterations and additions:

In 1923, a brick fly-gallery was added to the rear of theater. The exits to the stage were fitted with automatic fire shutters and automatic grid iron ventilators. At the same time, automatic sprinklers were installed throughout the entire building. "From wall to wall the stage is 62 feet wide; it is 40 feet deep from the curtain to the back wall. The proscenium opening is 32 feet, six inches. The new stage has a grid iron height of 75 feet." (State Times Advocate, "New Stage of the Columbia Modern in All Aspects", April 5, 1923, p. 1.) The contractor was the Stewart McGehee Construction Company.

Between 1931 and 1936, the Paramount sign was painted on the fly-gallery by Greene Sign & Advertising Co. The 1931 and 1934 Baton Rouge

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Directories list "Greene, George A., Sign Painter, 1227 North Blvd." The 1936 Directory adds Greene Sign & Advertising Co. Earlier and later Directories have no listing for Greene or his company.

The construction and installation of the wedge-shaped marquee with the Paramount sign started in November, 1937. "The new marquee of the Paramount Theatre will be made of porcelain enamel with shadow-type letters - illuminated in colors of orange, black, blue and green." (State Times Advocate, October 27, 1937, p. 1).

The architect was Norman Riviere and the contractor, Robert Thibodeaux. Stylistically, it appears that the facade of the ground floor could have been "modernized" at the same time. The bases of the two Doric columns, flanking the entrance, were encased with glass brick. Blue Carrara glass was added to the first floor facade.

The wide cinema scope screen was installed in 1953. For better viewing, three boxes were removed from either side of the proscenium, and the ceiling was cut out for projection. In 1965, the concessions stand was moved from the outer vestibule to where the rail at the back of the theater used to be.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The opening of the Columbia Theatre on September 4, 1920, was a momentous occasion in Baton Rouge. Dedication ceremonies included a concert by the Stanocola Brass Band, music by the Columbia Concert Orchestra and an opening prayer by the Reverend Canon Racine of St. Joseph's Church. The theatre was adorned with flowers from "business houses associated with the theatre and from individuals interested in the venture." (State Advocate Times, September 6, 1920, p. 2) The

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l,100 theatergoers then watched the nationally acclaimed Miss Norma Talmage perform in Arthur Goodrich's celebrated play, "Yes or No?," followed by Magda Lane in "Bought and Fought For," a two-part western drama.

The theater was designed for both live entertainment and silent movies. "Columbia, the Theatre beautiful" provided the "best in vaudeville and screen acts." (Columbia Theater Programme, week commencing November 4, 1923.) Croups such as the famed "Lee Lassie White Minstrels" performed. In 1926, the outstanding musical booking was "No, No Nanette", which, at the time, was the "rage of the whole world and which has New York and Chicago each clamoring for seats." (State Times Advocate, November 16, 1926, p.5.) The "Talkies" were introduced in 1927, and thereafter, the number of live performances waned.

Throughout the years, however, many movies have been filmed in the Baton Rouge area. As a result, leading actors and actresses such as Roy Rogers, Clark Cable, and Mary Pickford gave special live performances at the Paramount.

Two world premieres also took place here. In 1958, "The Long Hot Summer" starring Joanne Woodward, Paul Newman, and Orson Welles made its debut. "Desire in the Dust", featuring Raymond Burr and Irene Ryan, premiered in the mid-1960s.

In the 1950s, Tom Mitchell, the manager, booked legitimate theater about ten times a year. The performances included Joan Bennett and Zachary Taylor in "Bell, Book and Candle"; Katharine Cornell in "Constant Wife"; Eddy Bracken in "The Seven Year Itch" and the road show of "Oklahoma." Dance companies including the Ballet of Monte Carlo and the Jose Greco Dancers also performed. Attempting to keep up with the times, Mitchell also booked rock star Jimmy Buffett in 1968. Music and theater groups continue to perform at the Paramount.

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### C. Sources of Information:

- 1. Old views (included in Supplemental Material);
  - a. Front facade, ca. 1920s photograph, photographer unknown, Baton Rouge Public Library.
  - b. Front facade, post-1937 photograph, photographer unknown, Baton Rouge Public Library.
  - c. Interior showing ceiling painting, undated photograph, photographer unknown, from a private collection.

## 2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

City of Baton Rouge, Parish of East Baton Rouge Charter Books, Conveyance Records, Government Building, Centroplex, 222 St. Louis Street, Baton Rouge, La. 70821 Building Permits, 300 North 10th Street

Interview with Charles Bazzell, Present Manager (1977-), Paramount Theatre, July, 1978.

Interview with Odysseus Davis, construction worker on the theatre in 1920 and subsequently custodian until retirement in 1976, July, 1978.

Interview with Thomas Mitchell, Former Manager (1950-1977), Paramount Theatre, July, 1978. He also has extensive files on the Paramount during this period.

b. Secondary and published sources:

1915-1916 (Volume VII), 1918 (Volume VIII), 1922-1923 (Volume IX), 1924-1925 (Volume X), 1927 (Volume XI) Directories, Piedmont Directory Co., Asheville, North Carolina.

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1929 Directory (no volume number), Interstate Directory Co., Springfield, Missouri.

1931, 1934, 1936, 1937 Directories, R.L. Polk, New Orleans, Louisiana.

State Times Advocate Baton Rouge, Louisiana:

September 2, 1920, pgs. 7-8, 12-13. September 6, 1920, p.2. February 2, 1923, p.2. April 5, 1923, p.1. November 16, 1926, p.5. November 3, 1930, p. 16. October 27, 1937, p.1. December 20, 1939, p.1.

Sunday Advocate, Baton Rouge, Louisiana:

Slaughter, John. "Theater Masterpiece." (No year or page number.)

Other clippings - no author, title or page number, March 19, 1975, November 21, 1976, October 21, 1977.

Sanborn Map of Baton Rouge, 1923, Sanborn Perris Map Co., 117 Broadway, New York.

3. Likely Sources not yet investigated:

Thomas Mitchell, the former Manager for the Hart family, has extensive records. Interviews should be arranged with Mr. Richards of the former Paramount-Richards Co., in New Orleans, who operated the Paramount, and with Mrs. Stafford of New Orleans, whose husband ran the Paramount from the fifties until his death a few years ago.

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A study of the leasing arrangements might also prove illuminating.

Prepared by Sibyl McCormac Croff
Project Supervisor
Historic American
Buildings Survey
Summer, 1978

# PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

#### A. General Statement:

- 1. Architectural character: The Columbia Theater, built in 1920, features a Classical Revival facade recalling its beginning as a vaudeville and silent movie theater. The 1930s addition of a glass block and blue Carrara glass facade with neon marquee represents the Art Deco Hollywood era which signalled the Columbia's change into the Paramount, a grand movie theater. The combination and integration of old and new is the most interesting feature of the theater.
- 2. Condition of fabric: Good. The building is structurally sound, and the facade ornamentation is in fair condition.

## B. Description of exterior:

- 1. Over-all dimensions: The rectagular building is 60' wide (three-bay front) by 152' long and three stories tall with a fly gallery.
- 2. Foundations: Brick with concrete.
- Wall construction, finish, and color: The front facade is poured concrete scored to resemble stone, with concrete statuary and relief work.

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The front is painted white. The first level has a glass block and blue carrara glass facade, which continues around to the side elevations of the first floor level, incorporating two storefronts.

The building is encriched by four Doric columns spanning two floors and figures depicting various aspects of the theater. tympanum contains precast figures of the three Graces surrounded by figures exemplifying drama and tragedy. A melange of putti dancing and playing musical instruments is found in the metopes of the frieze. Six groupings of five putti flank a central metope of seven putti holding a ribboned cartouoche. years of paint accumulation, these are hardly discernible. In between the Doric columns and beneath the architrave, there are four lifesize male statues, fasbioned from poured, molded concrete. The statues are supported by interior rods which are hooked onto the wall between the Doric pilasters. They were made locally.

- 4. Structural system: Most walls are brick, masonry bearing walls. Reinforced concrete is used, particularly in the lobby and the proscenium arch. Structural steel roof framing is employed in both the body of the theatre and the fly gallery.
- 5. Porches: In the middle bay of the east facade, three steps up from the sidewalk, is a covered outer vestibule. It contains an ovoid ticket kiosk with scagliola and small colored porcelain tiles around the base. Four columns support the oval dome. From this level, there are four more steps up to the entrance doors. The steps and outer vestibule floor are paved with faded colored and patterned tiles.

Along the wall is a 2'-3" high baseboard of glazed tiles, with a molded fleur-de-lis pattern.

# 6. Openings:

- a. Doors: Three modern double doors flanked by Doric pilasters provide access from the outer vestibule into the lobby of the theater. The main elevation also has two glass doors leading into the storefronts. Twelve fire exits lead from the main body of the theater to the outside.
- b. Windows: The only windows visible from the front are the modern shop windows of the storefronts. Above the marquee and behind the Paramount sign is a glass brick infill. Above the entrance doors, from the outer vestibule to the lobby, are three sets of double-casement windows with six lights each. Standing in the outer vestibule, plain single windows of the manager's office (now blocked up) and the ladies' room, on the mezzanine level, are visible.
- 7. Roof: The roof is flat, with a covering of gravel and tar.

## C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The main entrance consists of the outer vestibule flanked by two storefronts. The main floor contains the concessions stand and orchestra section divided by two main aisles. The center section has eighteen rows of seats and the sides have twenty. Several rooms underneath the stage serve a variety of needs. Rest rooms are below the lobby.

The mezzanine consists of boxes, which cantilever from the exterior walls, and rows of seats, which face the stage. The manager's office and the ladies' room are also on this floor. The balcony (third floor) has additional seats and houses the projectionist's booth.

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- 2. Stairways: All stairways are reinforced concrete. From either side of the lobby, stairways descend to the rest rooms and ascend to the mezzanine and balcony. From the corridors adjacent to the stage, stairways go up to the boxes. Two additional stairways to the mezzanine have been closed off. The rooms underneath the stage can be reached by a few steps in the orchestra pit or from a flight of steps at the rear of the stage. At the south end of the stage, an interior door leads to the boiler room below. This can also be reached by an exterior door.
- 3. Flooring: Flooring throughout the theater is concrete, with carpeting along the aisles and main staircases.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Most walls have a stucco finish that has been painted pink. The walls in the orchestra section are scored at the bottom to resemble stone. The plastered ceiling has some ornamental decoration, as well as the decorative functional grating of the typhoon fan system. One major portion of this ceiling is now covered with painted canvas. The seats, boxes, drapery and some ornamentation is painted burgundy. The ceiling in the lobby is acoustical tile.
- 5. Doorways and Doors:

There are two sets of double doors with ten lights per panel, flanking the lobby, that lead into the orchestra section.

There are three steel fire exit doors on each side of the orchestra. Exit doors are also located on each side of the two balconies. Additional fire doors are on the north, west and south sides of the stage. The doors throughout the interior are plain and have architrave trim.

6. Special decorative features: The interior still retains much of its original ornamentation.

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The orchestra and semi-elliptical proscenium arches are surrounded by gilded plaster molding in a bay-leaf garland pattern.

Two angled arches, with concrete details resembling beaded molding, fall in between and perpendicular to the orchestra and proscenium The top sections of these arches have arches. lattice work over the organ pipe vents. the top of these arches, and beneath the lattice work, are gilded plaster cartouches, containing the letters "C" and "T", for Columbia Theatre. These are mingled with and surrounded by foliated decoration. these arches have a larger cartouche at the keystone and a smaller one somewhat below. larger cartouche of the same design is found on the proscenium arch.

In the center of the ceiling, in front of the proscenium arch, is a gilded medallion. Originally, this contained a painting, but because of its advanced state of deterioration, the theater had it painted over. The molding on the ceiling between the orchestra and proscenium arches is made of gilded cement. Similar molding is also found on the spandrels adjacent to the orchestra arch.

The boxes on the north and south sides of the auditorium are supported by ornamental brackets with volutes and acanthus leaves. Above each bracket, on the sides of the boxes, are four gilded plaster relief dancing girls set in a pink colored recess. Above the boxes there are four inverted hood-shaped light fixtures with volute scrolls. The balcony contains some of the cast-iron seats originally found in the orchestra section.

7. Mechanical Equipement: An automatic sprinkling system, installed in 1923, is still intact.

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The original boiler has been converted to gas. The original dimmer bank controls and some of the original stage equipment are still in use. The footlights on the stage have three separate circuits and the original ceiling fans remain.

- 8. Notable original furnishings: Accompaniment for live entertainment and silent movies was provided by a Robert Morton organ. This outstanding organ fell into disrepair in the 1930s, but was restored to working condition in the 1960s. This organ is one of the few extant playable organs produced by the company, who fell victim to the depression in 1935.
- D. Site: The principal facade faces east on Riverside Mall (formerly Third Street) in downtown Baton Rouge.

Prepared by Sibyl McCormac Groff
Project Supervisor
Kate Johns
Architect
Historic American
Buildings Survey
August 1978

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# PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the City of Baton Rouge, Parish of East Baton Rouge, Department of Public Works, Division of Community Development. Under the auspices of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth Anderson, Principal Architect, the project was completed in the summer of 1978 at the HABS field office, Department of Architecture, Louisiana State Unversity. The team was comprised of Sibyl McCormac Groff (Columbia University), project supervisor/historian; Timothy Allanbrook (Rhode Island School of Design), project foreman; architect Kate Johns (Arizona State University); and student architects William J. Graham (University of Maryland), Robert D. Louton (University of Arkansas), and George W. Steinrock, Jr. (University of Detroit).

ADDENDUM TO
COLUMBIA THEATRE
(PARAMOUNT THEATRE)
215 Riverside Mall
Baton Rouge
East Baton Rouge Parish
Louisiana

HABS NO. LA-1133 HABS LA, 17-BATRO, 7-

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013